9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

It is stated that in
Mayo a ploughman would be called in to shake a woman at a 845
difficult childbirth, presumably because it is he who prepares the ground and shakes the seed which brings new life to the fields.

Music, dancing, games and dramatic performances also 536
played their part in the seasonal gatherings, and one may 527
hazard the guess that the Irishman's passion for betting 796
derives from this source. A ritual element, as in the wake 842
games mentioned in the previous chapter, can often be detected, for example in the following account taken from the source quoted above. It describes a May game or pantomime from the Louth-Armagh border, modified survivals of which were current through most of the 19th century in the Slieve Gullion district. "On May day the figure of a female is made up, fixed upon a short pole and dressed in a fantastic manner, with flowers, ribbons, etc. This figure they call 'The May Baby.' Around it a man and woman (generally his wife) dressed also fantastically with straw, dance to the sound of a fiddle and entertain the people with indecent shows and postures, the figure at the same time being kept moving by the rustic maiden that supports it. These exhibitions cause great merriment among the assembled populace; women who have had no children also attend (some of them from a considerable distance) to see this figure and exhibition, which they imagine will promote fruitfulness in them, and cause them to have children. Money is collected, and when the actors and musician have received some remuneration the remainder is laid out in drink, and the evening passes by jovially." This magic pantomime was originally intended to secure the success of the year's crops.

Such rites and gatherings have gradually been suppressed 517
or won over by the Church; and Sunday evening is now the 526
favourite recreation time for dancing and games. Among the older games, hurley is most popular, and horse-racing has by no means lost its appeal although it has suffered like other amusements from commercial exploitation. On many a

11:Browne D-5 (1894) 1895
ER6 Rural Irish ER6
Kilmore

814 is likely to succeed in collecting much. Fortunately there is a [609] resident (the Rev. P. A. O'Reilly), who is engaged in collecting the old Irish songs of the district, several of which he has already published. As to the legends, many of these have been recorded by C. O. and Mr. Knight, to whose works the reader is referred.

The following notes, mainly dealing with what may be termed minor folk-lore, were some of them obtained from fishermen and others of the natives, but mainly through the kindness of several residents, some of whom desired that their names should not be mentioned.

115 1. *Customs and Beliefs.*—For the majority of the notes on these I 814 am indebted to the kindness of Mr. J. A. Nolan, of Belmullet, who, being a native of the district, and personally acquainted with nearly everyone in it, has an exceptionally large knowledge of the subject; for a large part of what remains I have also to thank Messrs. F. C. Wallace, D.I. R.I.C., Belmullet, and P. T. O'Reilly, Carn.

777 A very large number of things are considered lucky or the reverse. It is unlucky to dig a grave on a Monday, on which day also no change of residence should be made, a Friday should rather be chosen, as that is the lucky day for moving. To meet a red-haired woman on starting out in the morning, to mention a priest while fishing, to take fish out of a house without sprinkling some salt on it, to sell milk without putting in a pinch of salt, to give fire out of the house on May-day, or to anyone in whose dwelling a sick person may be, all these are unlucky. People "born with teeth" [845] are unlucky also; but to be "born with a caul" is a sign of great good fortune, though should the original owner ever see it his luck will depart; the possession of a caul is believed to protect against death by drowning. A mole on the face, if "above the breath," is considered to have the same protective influence.

787 Death within the year is believed to be the fate of the man who has the temerity to make an addition to the western side of his house, or to build out at the back; several instances of men who died within a short time after thus offending are sure to be told to the incredulous.

The banshee, the death-watch, the creaking of furniture, and the howling of a dog at night are all looked upon as death-warnings. Several persons were met with who asserted that they had heard the banshee before the death of relatives.

585 At weddings the bride and bridegroom must step over the threshold of the chapel door together, as whichever goes out first will be the first to die.

11: Browne D-5 (1894) 1895
ER6 Rural Irish ER6
Kilmore

845 In cases of difficult labour a ploughman may be called in to lift and shake the woman gently, which it is thought will produce the desired effect. The reason given is that as he shakes and scatters the seed on the earth, so also he ought to produce a good effect here.

[752] A nail which has got into the foot is always thrown into the fire.

757 278 *Leechcraft.*—Though regular medical assistance is usually sought for serious complaints, yet, the more common ailments are often treated by the people themselves, several of the older men and women enjoying some local celebrity for this.

The following list of substances used medicinally was collected; it is believed to be but a small fraction of the local pharmacopœia.

(A.) Animal substances.—Saliva is used for many purposes; thus button scurvy is treated by spitting on the floor and rubbing on the mixed saliva and dust with the right thumb.

Seal oil is rubbed in for sprains and rheumatism, for which it has a great reputation locally; it is sold in Belmullet at a pretty high price.

The tongue of a fox is used as a poultice to extract thorns, &c.

(B.) Herbs.—Mr. Nolan kindly provided the following list of plants in use in the district, most of which he has seen used. The qualities of many of these were also described to me by several of the country people.

Dandelion (*Leontodon taraxacum*), used for "liver troubles."

Comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*), used as a styptic.

Samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*), used, boiled in milk, for heart-burn.

Self-heal (locally called Heartsease) (*Brunella vulgaris*), used for palpitations.

Mountain sage (*Teucrium scorodonia*), used "for the heart" and in cough mixtures.

Ground-wood, or Bog-bark (not identified), used for gravel (boiled in milk).

Bugloss (*Echium* or *Lycopsis*), used, in poultices with oat-meal, for abscesses, &c.

Ground-ivy (*Nepeta glechoma*), used, as a "tea," for "heart beat," or mixed with other herbs for a cough.

Nettles (*Urtica dioica*), used, with ginger, for "wind on the stomach."

Ivy (*Hedera helix*), leaves used as a cap for a "scabby head."

Burdock root (*Arctium lappa*),
Furze tops (*Ulex*),
Broom (*Cytisus scoparius*),
Carageen moss (*Sphærococcus europæus*),
} usually combined and boiled with sugar-stick to form a cough-syrup.

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

doing others; and there is simple symbolic magic in the act of blowing the bellows in a forge to ensure safe delivery. In Mayo a ploughman would be called in to lift and shake a woman in difficult labour,[1] and there are hints of the *couvade* in the custom of wearing the husband's jacket during childbirth in the belief that he will then bear some of the pain. Mothers and babies were thought to be especially liable to be abducted by the fairies, and protective charms were hidden in a baby's dress or placed in the cradle. When children were taken to be baptised, too, special preparations were made and precautions taken, for example, a Co. Antrim clergyman reported that his parishioners would place a piece of bread and cheese in the child's clothing.[2] The old custom of dressing boys in girls' clothes, in long frocks, until they were ten or eleven years of age has been explained as a means of deceiving the fairies, who were always on the lookout for healthy young boys whom they could replace by feeble 'changelings'. For the same reason it is unwise to praise a child without adding a saving 'God bless him', and young boys are still half jocularly referred to as 'rogues and tories'. The belief in 'changelings' may have arisen as an explanation of the high mortality rate among baby boys as compared with girls.

When we come to the topic of the omens and rites of death and burial the supernatural world is ever-present. The custom of opening windows and doors to let the spirit of the dead depart is well known: in addition a hole was sometimes made in the roof thatch. Of Co. Sligo early last century we read: 'As soon as the breath has departed from a sick person, the bed is carried out, and if there be high ground near the house, it is there set on fire and consumed to ashes, while the air resounds with doleful cries.'[3] When death was imminent the sick person was laid on the floor, for this was believed to ease the escaping spirit. Two persons of the household should take part in every necessary task at this time, and two persons were sent out to carry news of the death, traditionally to the livestock and the bees as well as to the neighbours. Great care was taken to

[1] C. R. Browne, *The Mullet*.
[2] Wood-Martin, *Elder Faiths*, 2, 39.
[3] W. Shaw Mason, *Parochial Survey*, 2, 368.